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Trans/Homo/Queer: An Overview of Past and Present Discourses

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Abstract

Due to societal taboos, there continues to be intolerance and rejection of both lesbian and gay writing. The most obvious fact about the history of judicial formulation is that it codifies an intensely painful system of double binds, systematically oppressing gay people, identities and acts by undermining through contradictory constraints, on discourse the grounds of their very being. But there were certain clues in the *Puranas* that they enjoyed once some privileges in society. The present paper tries to analyse various narratives in literature in India and in Kerala to understand the queer identities vividly. It is an attempt to regain lost spaces of these people within the social space of Kerala.

Key Words: Homoeroticism, transgender, homosexuality, gay, lesbian,

Though in 1976, Mitchel Foucault mentioned 1870 as the birth date of modern homosexuality (43), Alan Bray in *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Katz in *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* and Jeffrey Weeks *Sex, Politics and Society* offered ever more precise datings of homosexuality. The recent historicizing works have assumed that the differences between the homosexuality, “we know today” and previous arrangements of same sex relations may be profoundly rooted in other cultural differences. It shows that there may be no continuous defining essence of homosexuality to be known. And hence modern homosexuality is so intimately entangled with the historically distinctive contexts and structures that now consider as knowledge. That knowledge itself constitutes that sexuality.

The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people, it is still the fundamental feature of social life. The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.

Tendencies by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick brings together for the first time the essays that have combined poetry, wit, polemic, and dazzling scholarship with memorial and autobiography. The suicide rate among the queer teenagers is two or three times likelier to appear. Many of the young gay and lesbian are throwaways.

Literature and Homosexuality edited by Michael J. Meyer contains a group of essays on a variety of themes relating to lesbian and gay literature and the work of gay and lesbian authors. The main objective of this book is to convince the reading public that 'normal' as a flexible term that accepts a wide range of sexual mores.

Native American two spirit traditions allow individuals to express alternative gender inclinations by adapting the work, behaviour, and dress of the other sex. It harmoniously balance powerful male and female forces within the individual.

In *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects*, Queer and non-heteronormative sexuality are fundamental issues of economics and material life especially in the geographic third world (Bhaskaran 14) thus for Bhaskaran it is the intersecting economic, social, political, cultural moments in postcolonial India, that have led to the emergence of sexual subjects who represent variations of dominance and subordination. Dasgupta in his reading of queer in the historical rhetoric of India argues, "It is therefore no surprise that the homophobia that was introduced through colonialism was also internalised by the modern Indian. Cross sex friendships, seen as a marker of western influence and same sex friendship were more acceptable" (Dasgupta 663).

Bakshi further says that in his work his reading "alternative arrangements of gender and sexuality in the postcolonial site of South Asia" relocates the arena of queer studies towards "non-Euro-American contexts and legitimates the status of —queer as a pluralistic critical formation" (7). He emphasizes the significance of postcolonial, diasporic, ethnic, racial, religious, class, caste and linguistic formations in addressing questions related to the representation of alternative genders and sexualities.

In *Same-Sex Love in India* edited by Ruth Vanita explains how love itself becomes a metaphor used in literary texts, though it need not take an explicitly sexual form. Written texts in India do not speak with one voice, but originate in oral traditions in layers over time. In *Kamasutra*, Puranic and *Katha Literature*, as well as in folk tales, there were instances of cross dressing, sexual interaction between men and between women and the ensuing ambiguity regarding gender. In *Rekhti*, late genre of medieval Urdu poetry written by men, we encounter depiction of sexual relationship between women.

In the medieval history *Muraqqa* is the word referring to beautiful young boys mentioned in the Persian text, *Portrait of a City. Krittivasa Ramayana* describes the two widows of King Dilipa as living together in extreme love. The last line of the text states that the sage named their child 'Bhagiratha', because he was born of two vulvas. Terms like 'tribade', Sapphist, sodomite, and Ganymede were used in various parts of ancient and medieval Europe and Asia Minor to refer to women who loved women and men who loved men. *Swayamvara sakhi* is the word used in the eleventh century *Kathasaritsagarato* indicate same-sex emotions that include and transcend friendship.

The *Rid Veda Samhita* presents an ideal of friendship as a very sacred relation and creative while it puts man-woman relation as procreative. The preoccupation with friendship continues in the epics, for example the friendship between Arjuna and Krishna in *Bhagavad Gita* and in *Mahabharata*. The identical invocation with which each of the eighteen books of Mahabharata opens is addressed to the two primal sages Nara and Narayana, of whom Arjuna and Krishna are said to be reincarnations. Krishna makes a powerful declaration of love to Arjuna in "Vana Parva" XII: "Thou art mine and I am thine while all that is mine is thine also! . . . O Partha, thou art from me and I am from thee!"

Krishna clearly states that Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen. It is for Arjuna's sake that Krishna commits several acts in battle that are condemned by foes as unrighteous. For instance, Krishna, by miracle makes the sun appear as if it has set and then brings it back into the sky, thereby deluding the foes: "I, therefore, will do that tomorrow, by which Arjuna, . . . may slay Jayadratha before the sun sets. . . . I shall not be able to cast my eyes, even for a single moment, on the earth bereft of Arjuna. . . . Know that Arjuna is half of my body." ("Drona Parva" LXXIX: 153)

The best known sex change in ancient literature is that of Amba into Sikhandin. It is significant that the sex change in the *Mahabharata* story takes place in the forest with the help of a forest dwelling spirit or non-human being with semi-divine powers. This relates to its being outside the sphere of normative order. It is in the forest that Amba performs austerities and receives a boon. When she was reborn as Sikhandini, it is in the forest that the Guhyaka exchanges sexes with her.

John Garrette Jones, in his analysis of the *Jataka Stories*, has noted the love of male friends in these stories. Jataka story 498 narrates 'three former births of the bodhisatta and Ananda, first as two Candala outcastes, then as two deer, 'when they always went about together . . . ruminating and cuddling together, very happy' (107). Jones comments that 'within the *Jataka Stories*, sex and marriage on the whole are portrayed as bad; love and friendship on the whole are presented as good which is against the canonical position. Similar

patterns of choice between conjugality and same sex community are in the second and third century Tamil epics *Shilappadikaram*, and *Manimekhalai*.

In the Padma Purana –one of the texts from the Sanskrit tradition– Arjuna, after inquiring Krishna about the nature of the Gopis (Khrisna’s faithful shepherdesses), embarks on a long and windy journey among meditation, Tantric yoga and prayer until his rebirth in the body of a woman called Arjuni.

In Buddhist and Hindu traditions, gender itself is questioned. In Buddhism, a *kalayanamitra*, or compassionate friend is one who instructs and support in the dharma. There are many examples of women becoming *bodhisattas*, then becoming men, and finally becoming buddhas. One of the extended debates on gender is discussed in the “Santi Parva” of the *Mahabharata*. The debate takes place between King Janaka and Sulabha, a Yogini mendicant. Vatsyayana used the term “the third nature” in *Kamasutra* to describe males attracted to other males. The *Kamasutra* emphasizes that whether the man concerned is feminine looking or masculine looking, this external appearance makes no difference to his desire for men.

It is interesting to observe that The Hindu God Shiva is often represented as Ardhanarishvara, with a dual male and female nature. One of the Evidence is a sculpture from the Elephanta Caves near Mumbai. In India, *hijas* function as one visible model of difference.

TheManusmriti, which lists the oldest codes of conduct that were proposed to be followed by a Hindu, does include mention of homosexual practices, but only as something to be regulated. Though homosexuality was considered a part of sexual practices, it was not always well accepted. There were punishments prescribed for homosexual behaviour.

The Qur’an cites the story of people of Lot (also known as the people of Sodom & Gomorrah), destroyed by the wrath of Allah because they engaged in ‘lustful’ carnal acts between men. The following passages are taken from the Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation of the Qur’an.

We also sent Lut: He said to his people: Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women; ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds. And his people gave no answer but this: they said, "Drive them out of your city: these are indeed men who want to be clean and purer." (Qur'an 7:80-82)

The representations of homophobia and the pressures of performing gendered roles in a society which reinforces gender stereotypes are visible in the texts like Raj Rao’s *The Boyfriend* (2003) and *Hostel Room 121* (2010), and Sandip Roy’s *Don’t Let Him Know* (2015). Sandip Roy’s, *Don’t Let Him Know* reflects on the denial of one’s sexual orientation and the consequences on family life and ties. Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance like a Man* (2006) deals with the self and the significance of the other, through the frameworks of gender and gender roles. Raj Rao’s novel *The Boyfriend* brings to the fore the hidden and chaotic side of Mumbai’s Gay Subculture.

For many lesbians, the household and family is a composite of sanctuary and prison. While it might offer refuge from the assaults of the outside world, it can be a coercive realm of the incessant pressure to marry, a grim monitoring of sexuality. The rigid model offered to us as ‘the traditional family’ is constantly reshaped by lesbian reality. *Facing the Mirror* (1999) brings together for the first time the richness and diversity of lesbian existence in India, through fiction and poetry, essays and personal history. Amita’s autobiographical account “Foreplay”, describes two women struggling to balance their commitment to children; “One and One is Three” (xxxii) a lesbian named Radhika expressed her anguish. Revathi’s “On Creased Earth”, metaphorically expresses the lesbian reality in Indian context: “Framed in the door’s shade, she struggles like an evening moth into the glare of day.” (139) Anasuya’s poem ‘Threesome’ touch on both the intensity and the difficulty of living non-monogamously. Even more than the individual bonds of love, it is the group, the networks, described in the part “Connection”, which society finds disturbing. (289-355)

The famous lines “mamsa nibaddhamalla ragam”(love is not bound by flesh/body) written by the Malayalam poet Kumaranasan (1873-1924) needs to be specially discussed in this context. The category of love without sex was introduced in modern Malayalam poetry by Kumaranasan.

In the post mid 20th century Malayali public sphere there is a near absolute silence about homosexuality despite it being a strong subtheme, sometimes even as the main plot as we saw in the context of *Rantu Penkuttikal* by Nandakumar and novels and stories of authors like Ayyaneth and Johnson. This was mainly because the Malayali public sphere had already arrived at the conclusion that homosexuality was a ‘social sore’ during the contentions that followed the publication of *Shabdangal* in the late 1940s. A scathing account of a soldier’s life experiences narrated by himself to the author the novella uses the device of the soldier's narration to

discuss the horrors of war, the power politics, the frustrations of the soldiers, questions of desire, sexual diseases and moral perversions in fairly open and ideological terms. *Shabdangal*, by all means, was, as Pundey described, a critical text that, “revealed the worldliness of criticism” and was “constructed according to the critic’s location” (Pundey 2003, 141-142). While discussing Basheer’s novelette *Sahodaran Ayyappan* (1889-1968), a renowned social reformer and journalist-politician, praised *Shabdangal* as “a new venture both thematically and methodically . . . Social reformation shouldn’t be restricted to the superficialities and instead should clean the internal parts of the society by removing the dirt from it” (Ayyappan 1948 quoted in Sanu 2007, 153).

A collection of short stories titled *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal (Five Bad Stories)*, published in 1946, was a clear articulation of the ‘dissolute’ intentions that drove these authors. As is reflected in the title itself, all five stories dealt with themes that were highly and explicitly sexual in their contents. A collection of short stories that was entitled *Anchu Nalla Kathakal (Five Good Stories)* published in 1947 were equally unconventional. This not only led to multiple claims towards realism but also deeply inscribed the divisions between good and bad solely in terms of the absence and presence of sex in representations. Ponkunnamm Varkki, another well known writer and one of the contributors in the “Bad Stories”, compared the society with a leprous body covered in a silk blanket.

Thakazhi’s 1968 published short novel *pennu* which narrated the tale of two young women who happened to fall into an intimate relationship with each other. Sumathi, the protagonist, having abandoned by her husband and later by the protector who was ruthless for her ill fate, happens to fall into an intimate relationship with the concubine (Gaurikkutty) of the latter. The intimacy very soon transforms into a sexual relationship between the two. “Sumathi protects Gaurikkutty and she in return takes care of Sumathi. It would have been called a husband-wife relation had they been a man and a woman. What will we call it now?” (54-55) In his introduction to a 1997 anthology of modern Malayalam short stories, Satchidanandan makes the following appraisal of Kamala Das’s work: “Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das) explores the innermost recesses of the female psyche in her uninhabited portrayals of man-woman and woman-woman relationships”.

“The Hijra” by Kamala Das is a short story that revolves around a woman’s lunatic search for her lost child who was born eunuch in the colony of the eunuchs and the hermaphrodites (Sion Koliwada, Bombay). The story is in third person. “She” is used throughout as the pronoun for the hijras. The opening paragraph establishes that the norms of the society have marginalized them to the extent that they laugh and use obscene lingo to describe their physical details when “the city women who get scared hurriedly throw some coins to them and walk away” (108-114).

First Transgender Malayalam poet Vijayarajamallika talks about her unique experience. In school days Manu J. Krishnan (real name) was bullied and made fun of by classmates and teachers for his feminine ways. The anguished parents took the boy of 16 first to a psychiatrist who identified the ‘problem’ as homosexuality and then to an endocrinologist who began hormone therapy to suppress the female in her who was waiting to burst out of the male body. “Oh Time, turn into a magician/ for me/ In shedding this frame, stand by me.” (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>)

Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol (2017) by Kishor Kumarin Malayalam deals with the author’s personal experiences as well as a collection of essays on a range of subjects related to being queer.

Mohanaswamy (2013) by Vasudhendra in Kannada describes the stories of a gay man navigating the worlds of love, loss, caste, class, and sexuality, and navigating the world quite literally, from small town Karnataka to Mt Kilimanjaro. This book introduces more openness towards queer people in Karnataka. *Lihaaf* (1942) by Ismat Chughtai in Urdu portrays the life of Begum Jan. Begum Jan’s lihaaf (quilt) cannot keep her warm, but she finds warmth elsewhere – with her housemaid Rabbu, whose vigorous oil massages awaken something new within her. Chughtai was charged with obscenity for writing *Lihaaf*, although the story never makes the lesbian relationship explicit. *Vidupattavai* (2018) by Gireesh in Tamil is a collection of a variety of forms poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction responding to homophobia, to centre the Tamil gay voice. In one of the poems from this collection translated in English by Sheiji Tadokoro, the narrator talks about trying to walk “the man walk.”

I almost reached the doors

With a triumphant smile

I push the glass door, where

I see in reflections;

you all are laughing behind me

Again, I miserably failed (www.firstpost.com)

Me Hijra...Me Laxmi (2012) in Marathi by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi whom Rushdie called as “the force of nature” is a memoir about the beauty of desire, fluid identities, doing what you love, and being true to oneself. *Punarapi* (2017) by Kavya Kadame Nagarakatte in Kannada tells the story of Asma and Anusha who come from very different backgrounds and find themselves madly attracted to each other.

Same sex desire is rendered invisible in both asexual romantic tradition and the progressive genre of realism. The politics of sexuality and the discourse of reformation have been operating to mediate the turbulent public sphere around the question of representational practices.

There should be a change in society against the existing myth that same sex love is a disease that led into dangerous conditions like live in shamed secrecy, try to ‘cure’ themselves, and hate themselves and attempt suicide. Instead of that everyone try to recognise and accept the lives of transgenders as lived space within the social space while considering gender as an experience that is more than the nature/culture divide.

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